

WOLVES

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But environmental groups strongly oppose any public hunting of the state’s roughly 150 wolves.

“Regardless of how it is framed, the hunting proposed will result in annual wolf killing — the very reason this species was wiped out from the Lower 48,” said Nick Cady, conservation director for the environmental group Cascadia Wildlands.

The proposal is one of 10 being considered during revisions to the wolf plan, a process that occurs every five years. The proposals will go before the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission during a meeting on April 21 in Klamath Falls.

The confusion — and disagreement — boils down to how you define hunting.

When wolves in northeast Oregon repeatedly attack livestock, the state is currently empowered to take lethal action. In March of 2016, for example, state officials killed four wolves in the Imnaha Pack.

In the proposed revision, ODFW is considering allowing members of the public — defined as licensed hunters and trappers — to kill the wolves instead of state officials. The move would save the department time and money, a state report says.

“Currently, a large expenditure of personnel and financial resources is involved,” the report says. “It follows that the future use of hunters and trappers would be expected to assist.”

The hunting would only apply to wolves in the eastern third of Oregon after they reach Phase 3 of the wolf plan — seven breeding pairs for three consecutive years. That could happen as early as 2017, but given the small wolf population, and the fact that any use of public hunters would need to be approved by the ODFW Commission, it may not happen very quickly, officials said.

Jim Akenson, conservation director for the Oregon Hunters Association, said he supports a highly-regulated permit system being implemented.

“Right now, a wolf biologist goes out and shoots the wolves when there’s a problem,” Akenson said. “Why not utilize the situation



Courtesy of Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

An ODFW biologist in the process of collaring wolf OR33, a 2-year-old adult male from the Imnaha pack, Feb. 25, 2015 in Wallowa County. Larger wild animals are typically blindfolded while immobilized to protect eyes and to help calm them.

in a manner that provides a hunting opportunity, while also serving a management need?”

Environmentalists worry that issuing a special permit to hunt wolves would create a financial incentive for ODFW to allow more opportunities, Cady said.

“The hunting proposal sets up an incentive system whereby funding for the wolf program will rest upon making chronic depredation determinations and commissioning these hunts,” he said in public testimony.

It’s also premature, said Arran Robertson, spokesman from the environmental group Oregon Wild.

“The wolf population is still very small and in recovery,” he said. “Deputizing the public to kill wolves on the agency’s behalf presupposes that ODFW is going to need to kill so many wolves that they can’t afford to do it anymore.”

Even more controversial than allowing the public to hunt is the proposal that wolves be eliminated for “causing major declines of ungulate populations,” such as deer and elk.

That question is also being considered by ODFW.

“Wolves can be very hard on ungulate populations,” Akenson said. “We’re just asking the department to look at specific cases and keep the hunting community as part of the equation as we move into the future.”

As a research scientist for the University of Idaho in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, Akenson said he documented an elk herd reduction of over 50 percent in five years in one

area caused primarily by wolf predation.

Environmental groups say killing any of the roughly 150 wolves to save a population of around 125,000 elk or 220,000 mule deer is premature and unnecessary. And, they said, the benefit of wolves is bringing equilibrium to the ungulate population.

“Let us put to bed the great unwashed notion that wolves routinely so negatively impact wild ungulate populations that there is a precipitous decline in deer and elk,” said Amaroq Weiss, West Coast Wolf Organizer for the Center for Biological Diversity. “Wolves and their wild prey evolved in lockstep for tens of thousands of years; it simply defies ecological sense for wolf predation to have a catastrophic impact on its wild prey.”

Somewhere between nine and 14 wolves have been illegally killed in Oregon since 2007, according to police reports and ODFW data. That number may be higher, given most of the wolves tallied were wearing radio-collars.

The two sides disagree about the impact public hunting would have on wolf poaching in Oregon.

Todd Nash, a rancher from Enterprise, said he thought allowing the public to hunt could alleviate some of the frustration rural residents have felt with the arrival of wolves.

“You have to understand that having wolves here at all is a large stretch for a lot of people in the hunting and ranching community,” said Nash, who works with the Oregon Cattlemen’s Association. “I think allowing them to have some control in the process — instead of being told there’s nothing they can do about a clear problem — would go a long way.”

Environmental groups disagreed, and referenced a study published in the Royal Society Publishing that said “allowing wolf culling was substantially more likely to increase poaching than reduce it,” according to the authors.

“Our results suggest that granting management flexibility for endangered species to address illegal (behavior) may instead promote such (behavior),” the study abstract said.

ODFW staff will make a recommendation on the issue and report to the Commission.

New timeline for revised Blue Mountain plan

Final environmental impact statement may be ready by June

By George Plaven
East Oregonian

It may be 12 years overdue, but the U.S. Forest Service is inching closer to revising the outmoded Blue Mountains Forest Plan.

A final environmental impact statement, or EIS, may be ready by the end of June, according to Victoria Anne, revision team leader. The final EIS was expected before the end of 2016, though staff turnover has further delayed what has already been a lengthy process.

In addition, the Forest Service has crafted two new plan alternatives based on a year’s worth of feedback from local communities and stakeholders. When completed, the Blue Mountains Forest Plan will form the backbone for land management on the Umatilla, Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur national forests.

But there is still plenty of work left to do, even after the agency’s environmental analysis is finished.

Tom Montoya, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest supervisor, said there will be a 90-day objection period after the final EIS is issued, and it could take six months or more to work through objections.

Certainly, the plan has proven a lightning rod for controversy since a draft environmental analysis was released in 2014. While not a decision-making document in and of itself, it does set desired conditions for everything in the woods from fire protection and logging to wilderness and road access.

The proposal drew so much fire that the Forest Service decided to take a step back in 2015 and re-engage through a series of public meetings. Through that process, Montoya said officials heard

from locals who wanted to see them pick up the pace and scale of restoration to make the forests more healthy, while also protecting old growth trees.

That’s what the two new alternatives will seek to address in different ways, Montoya said.

“We continue to have that dialogue,” he said.

The Forest Service was on track to have the final EIS out last fall, but the timeline has since been stretched out to later this year. Part of the delay, Montoya said, was the departure of former team leader Sabrina Stadler, who left in August.

Stadler died on Sept. 7, 2016, due to complications with pancreatitis. Michael Hampton, a retired Forest Service employee, filled the role of team leader on an interim basis until Anne arrived on the job in mid-December.

The team also recently brought on a new fisheries biologist to lead consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on complying with the federal Endangered Species Act — primarily for Snake River salmon, steelhead and bull trout.

“We’ve been trying our best to temporarily fill some of those gaps,” Montoya said.

Though the Blue Mountains Forest Plan is being studied under one umbrella, each of the three forests will have its own individual plan. The final decision will come down to Regional Forester Jim Peña in the Forest Service’s Portland headquarters.

Montoya said the two new alternatives could more than double the pace of restoration being done on the forests. The question is how and where that restoration will be addressed.

“We’re trying to make sure we’re being responsive as much as possible, meeting with folks who want to help us with this,” Montoya said.

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